

There, On That Stretch Of Road

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Abstract:
There, On That Stretch Of Road
Robert Sternberg

There, On That Stretch Of Road is Part One and Part Two of a novel-in-progress. The title is taken from Virginia Woolf's novel, *To The Lighthouse*: "... but it seemed to him as if their friendship had ceased, there, on that stretch of road." What has been extracted, my title, will always be linked to the clause which precedes it, and this absent clause points towards the major theme of the novel: the dissolution of a friendship.

The story documents just over one full year in the life of two young men in their early twenties. It begins in September of 2000 and ends in the late summer of 2001 (the thesis ends before the spring). The story is recounted in the first person by one of those two young men. Some time has passed since the events of the narrative. The narrator is writing the story, he is a writer. But I've made an effort to keep his present circumstances remote. Just where he is exactly at the time of his writing is not made explicit. What is important is that he is still preoccupied with the events that took place from September 2000 to the late summer of 2001, so much so that he has taken it upon himself to order those events into this story. And so, in the novel, there is the present tense and there is the past tense – the former gestures towards that remote place from where the narrator is writing. The story belongs to the past, while the tone, the language, the interpretation, and some select observations – in effect, its retelling – all belong to the present. Nevertheless, there are multiple instances of intersection.

“But it seemed to him as if their friendship had ceased, there, on that stretch of road.”

Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*

It was sometime in the early fall of 2000 when I found myself sitting, breathing, completely naked if not for the white towel wrapped loosely around my waist. All around me was a mist of steam, with more than a trace of eucalyptus. I'm speaking of the steam room in the men's locker room of the tennis club my parents have belonged to for as long as I can remember. Directly opposite me, wearing a white towel around his own waist, sat a new friend of mine. I had brought him to the club that afternoon as a guest. We played tennis, two sets over the course of ninety minutes, and I lost both of them, 5-7, 5-7. I was now consumed, overwhelmed, by an intense mood of despondency. I lost. I did not win. I could not will myself to victory. I was clearly the better player, the one with the better all-around game; but the mental part of tennis is just as, if even more important than, the physical part.

It had been a long time since I last played a match of competitive tennis. It had been years, in all probability. There were several occasions over the preceding few years when I rallied with my father. But there is a world of difference between the attitude one can afford to take in a casual rally and the requisite attitude of a match. Only the terrible memories of childhood and early adolescence rushed back to me in the second set when my body stiffened up at a time when it should've been loose, and how with each tentative stroke I couldn't help but betray to my opponent the fear and the caution burgeoning inside my head. I never had the head for tennis, or, to put it better, the idea that I didn't have the head for tennis was something I was often reminded of in my early youth. In the same way I came to believe it then, I was forced now, in the face of this fresh defeat, to believe it again. Indeed I believed it again, devoutly, as those clouds of steam continued to seep out from the silver pipe just visible beside the bare right calf of my friend, who,

by his fitful movements, was giving me the impression he wasn't in the least appreciating what I considered to be the restorative effects of the steam room.

I remember then the heavy glass door being opened and shut securely by a very gaunt, grey-haired man, with a long purplish scar running down the length of his hairless abdomen. He sat his naked body down next to mine, set his ankle on his knee, and began picking away at a bunion underlying his big toe while massaging the arch of his foot. His mouth hung open, was skewed to one side, and the eye on this same side was narrowed only slightly as he pressed his thumb with small revolutions into what was evidently that very sore tendon of his. That's when he made his remark, to us, to himself, to the room, a remark that had something to do with the fact that, at that precise moment in time, there wasn't a single place on the entire globe where he would've rather been than right there, in that steam room, the dimensions of which are roughly eight feet long by ten feet wide. On the court, I thought to myself, everything within me wants to win; but what is wanted within cannot always, can seldom, be realized.

It would not go unnoticed: from the steam room, to my father's locker, and out to the lower patio where we sat to eat lunch, Vincent did not wipe the self-satisfied smirk from his face. He even went so far as to repeatedly remind me of the afternoon's outcome in a manner which treaded the border between irritating and flat-out insulting. All the while my loser's anguish was still so acute that I was gradually becoming reduced to a single emotional state, as uncomplicated and negligible as the pulse of blood running through me. I could still become overwhelmingly upset with myself over something so pointless as a tennis match. I could still lose, not because I was outmatched, but on account of my head.

The sky that day was touched only by the crisscrossings of a few long and fading vapour trails. As soon as the food arrived I became confident that I might now focus all my attention on the chicken quesadilla set in front of me. It was the late afternoon already, the sun was declining; while Vincent faced the setting sun and the interior of the tennis club, I looked east. Beyond his shoulders extended the rest of the long patio until the patio stopped, dropped down, and the five easternmost courts began their own extension until they too stopped at the high wooden fence and the overhanging tress above the fence which cut off the view of the city. I saw men and women, old and young, all dressed in white, moving around the five courts. I saw and heard the *pop* of five yellow tennis balls being hit from north to south and south to north, some traveling low and fast, others slow with pronounced arches. All in all there was a very casual and easy feeling about the place, which was interesting, for lack of a better word, in light of all the stories I've heard from my father over the years concerning hostile eruptions between members, some so outrageous they seem more the stuff of fiction than real life.

"Didn't you see that tall man in there?" I was saying to him. "It's supposed to be a release. A way to sweat away the demons."

We were not in agreement. "The steam was burning my leg."

To which I replied with something so maternal in its simplicity. "Well, you shouldn't have sat so close to the pipe." And, in a final effort to agitate, the maternally belated question, "Why didn't you move?"

I wanted both our minds, together, to shift away from what lurked in the immediate past, namely my defeat and his victory. I was trying to effect this shift by giving him the impression I'd forgotten all about the match, that I could now, for

instance, become engaged in a conversation entirely about the steam room. I could see from his expression, nonetheless, that my performance was just shy of convincing, and so, as casually as possible, I removed several french-fries from his plate and sank back into my misery.

It was around this time that I distinctly recall hearing the words, “And at that moment, they both get sent down to hell!” followed by a hearty chorus of male laughter. Sitting at the table beside us, still dressed in their tennis whites, were four young men. Out of the four I immediately recognized the bright orange hair of Richard Campbell. When he looked over, I quickly averted my gaze, spending the next several minutes methodically spreading salsa and sour cream onto the last triangular piece of my chicken quesadilla. All the while Vincent, with cigarette in mouth, began to flick his thumb against his lighter, began to ceaselessly flick away at it as his cigarette danced along with his lips, and he stared intently at the almost imperceptible sparks that he and the lighter were making. It looked as though he could flick and stare like that forever, to the point that I hesitated for what was likely an additional minute before telling him, probably too matter-of-factly, that his was a pointless endeavour, not only on account of his lighter holding an insufficient amount of fluid, but also since smoking was not, under any circumstances, permitted on the lower patio.

We stood in identical poses, leaning back against the subway doors with our legs extended and crossed. Our bedrooms were directly across from each other on the third floor of 33 Barton Street, a run-down home located approximately six blocks west of the tennis club. We had one other roommate, Matthew, an aspiring actor who we shared the

top two floors of the house with. Matthew had a girlfriend at the time, also an aspiring actor, or actress, and also a fourth roommate, but a special kind of roommate, one who didn't contribute to the rent or groceries. Vincent and I, on the other hand, were profoundly girlfriendless, both of us disillusioned bachelors suffering from what we'd recently termed I.A.D, or Involuntary Abstinence Disorder. Needless to say, the symptoms were manifold.

Vincent was likely staring down at his worn-out white sneakers as the train traveled westward, while I remember dwelling on this fact alone: after all the preliminary talk, that was the first time we actually played tennis; after all the *I'll fucking destroy you's*, we could now move from the hypothetical to cold, hard, empirical fact. There wasn't one thing I could say now to convince him I was the more proficient player. I would be forced to wait nine whole months for the rematch. Of course, I had no idea then that it would take this long before I could once again try to prove what I wanted to prove to him, and even then, during the rematch, which took place the following May, there was far more at stake than a mere tennis game. In any case, the result of a mere tennis game was the only thing at stake on that subway ride home. And this dwelling, I should also mention, was a kind of obsessing. I really couldn't stand the thought that he was holding a certain belief about me which I wanted to consider untrue, which I wanted to correct.

We walked the few blocks from the subway station in silence, passing along the way several middle-eastern sandwich shops, a reparatory theatre screening "A Streetcar Named Desire," a few bars, CD and record shops, bookstores. There were small groups of people milling about and smoking around the doorways of the culture shops. The cafe

and pub patios were crowded with people taking in the day's remaining hours of sunshine, while clusters of students from a nearby high-school, recently back in session, loitered outside the few fast food restaurants on the strip. It was the late afternoon on a Friday.

Once back at our home it was the usual routine. He led as we climbed one set of stairs, kicked off our shoes, walked past the sunroom, the bathroom, Matthew's room (inside of which we could hear the muffled sounds of a movie playing), and, right before the kitchen, veered left to mount the next set of stairs, up to the third and final floor of the house. Our rooms were separated by a very small stretch of linoleum-lined floor, the length of either myself or Vincent. In between our bedrooms was the narrowest bathroom I had ever seen or used before, with no shower (we used the one downstairs), a paint-splattered mirror with five naked bulbs (two working) running along its top, and an unshapely hunk of wood for a door painted a deep deep crimson.

My humble room, like the sunroom one floor below, was located at the front of the house. It consisted of a mattress in one far corner, a mahogany desk by the window, a slanting bookshelf next to the door, a night table beside the bed, and a modestly sized Ikea table of pale wood against the wall adjacent to the night table. An inexplicable white ledge, at chest-level, ran the entire length of the room's northern wall. There was also a closet, the door of which could not be fully opened if the door to the room was also open.

This bedroom, as it existed for me, was not yet three months old. I moved in in early June – it was now September – from the apartment I'd shared with my brother for two long and tumultuous years. A small and rather stuffy bedroom, but it had its charms. It was a gable, having its own peaked roof, the tip of which was the second highest point

of the house. The room's one square window was almost perfectly aligned with the front door, both looking southward. The walls were painted a very soothing shade of orange and the ceiling was low and full of corners (while lying on my bed, I was learning, I could follow the radical angles of that ceiling, and this activity, assisted no doubt by the soothing shade of orange, had a way of straightening the often too circular inclinations of my mind). With the exception of the bookshelf, none of my few furnishings exceeded three feet in height. The window had no screen, only a thin, purple lace curtain, and was propped open – had been propped open since the day I moved in – by a brass, cylindrical penny bank that I've kept since a very young age. The floor, like that which covered the stretch of hallway between my room and Vincent's, was of a cheap, non-resilient linoleum, teal in colour, and peeling everywhere.

I settled myself by closing the door of that bedroom and taking a seat at my desk. Out the window and across the street was the neighbour's oak standing hugely on their front lawn. It rose up past my window, above my bedroom perch, its branches reaching over our roof. The leaves, displaying some of the colours of autumn already, only made me think of the imminence of the next season. This window, I thought, will soon be frosted over, I will soon be looking through frosted glass. In front of me sat my laptop which held at that time a number of poems and stories I'd written over the last few years. Inserted into the laptop was a blue ethernet cable connected to a blinking modem on the floor permitting me unrestricted access to an infinite gallery of pornographic images and video. Next to the laptop were a pile of new books and bright orange course packets with course codes and the names of professors typed on their covers in boldface. I was enrolled in school again, as a non-degree student, about to embark on a qualifying year

dedicated to the study of English literature so that I might increase my chances of being accepted into a Masters program in the forthcoming year. This was my short-term plan, and I was happy with it. Mostly on account of the fact that I hadn't had a plan since I graduated from university in the spring of 1998.

I reached under my chair, pulled a lever, leaned back, and stacked both heels of my feet onto the corner of the mahogany desk I now sit before. My name, both in full and its diminutive, has been carved into several places. Over the years, the grooves of each letter have been coloured and deepened with the tips of blue and black pens. In a matter of days I would be returning to school because I hadn't really gone in the first place. I had gone, but had studied acting. Matthew, my roommate, had also studied acting, and he was presently in his bedroom, one floor below, watching movies in the daytime under damp sheets that I never, not once, saw him wash. His girlfriend too, an actress. The three of us met in the drama program. We performed in several plays together: *Hamlet*, etc. Initially I wasn't grouped with the three male actors selected to portray Hamlet. Nevertheless, after begging the teacher for at least a morsel of this role, he scratched his head in distress, consulted his dog-eared copy of the play, and reluctantly gave me the soliloquy in Act IV, Scene 4, set on a plain in Denmark, beginning directly after Fortinbras' captain is dispatched from this same plain to Elsinore Castle. For the rest of the play, I entered and exited as Guildenstern.

There was then the matter of Richard Campbell, who, since seeing him an hour before at the tennis club, was intermittently entering and exiting my mind much like that not-so innocuous minor character in a Shakespearean play. We were junior members of the club together. My relationship with him was virtually non-existent despite the fact

that we were at one time both involved in a short-lived elite tennis clinic run by the club's pro from 6:30 – 8:00 every weekday morning for one winter season. It was only after Richard Campbell and I met each other in the semi-finals of the club's perennial under-fourteen singles tennis tournament that his existence became yoked to a private narrative, the interpretation of which – that it was significant – was mine and mine alone, and would continue to be for as long as I deemed it necessary.

I thought the narrative so significant, in fact, that I chose to relate it to Vincent later that evening while we played chess on the floor of his bedroom. I remember the game clearly. We were playing so tightly and so defensively that to commit but a single mistake had become a deadly possibility for either player; lucky for me, it was Vincent who experienced a momentary lapse in judgment, and it cost him his queen. What then separated me from victory, unless I too experienced a similar lapse in judgment, was a mere matter of time. Or so one would've thought while looking at the placement of the pieces across the board that night. But the fact remained that after surveying the board and realizing my advantage, then my ongoing inability to dispose of an opponent so clearly at a disadvantage would've produced in even the most unrealistic proponent of my chess-intellect more than just a shadow of a doubt as to what should've been, at that point in the game, an inevitability.

The proponent, unfortunately, was me, and the doubt, of course, was mine. So we were engaged in a cat-and-mouse game and every other move I would start to wonder who, exactly, was what. No, that's not it. I knew for certain I was the cat and every other move I would start to wonder if I was a hopelessly stupid cat about to be outsmarted. He had both his rooks and five pawns while I had one bishop, one rook, my queen, and

three pawns. Although my positioning was such that it prevented him from staging an offensive strike, his positioning had the same effect on me. Yet he was justified in his defensive strategy, on account of his disadvantage. So what was my excuse? I couldn't for the life of me wrap my head around the vertical placement of his rooks, and I knew, because he told me so, that the harmless checks with my queen were senseless, since he was inexhaustible, since he could "move his rooks all night like this" until either I mated him or until I made a mistake. Thank God I eventually realized that another exchange was essential, and it was while bending my mind towards this enterprise that I began to tell Vincent about Richard Campbell delivering to me my first real taste of defeat.

Part way through the retelling of this memory, however, I began to realize what a trifle the facts were, what a trifle it all was, and this was due in no small part to the signs of absolute boredom I could discern in Vincent, who was staring at the board throughout. At twelve years of age I had lost a game of tennis to a cheater. What made it so painful was that I had blown a not inconsiderable lead. A memory far from unique. So why had I hung onto it for over a decade? Why did the sight of Richard Campbell still make me nervous? More importantly, definitely more importantly, why was I affording the story such an elaborate retelling? The answer that night, as I sat before him with the chessboard between us, was in the bathtub. It was an answer I stumbled upon while trying to at least end the story well. My mother had run me a bath when I returned home with my father after the match. It was there, when at last alone, that I for the first time in my life gave myself over completely to the black hole of disappointment-in-oneself, or regret, as it's more commonly called. Never in my life had the irrevocability of the past presented itself to me with such a lack of compassion. Self-satisfaction and self-abnegation, fleeting

happiness attached to one, prolonged sadness to the other – two attitudes too easily determined by the arbitrary outcomes of winning and losing. I stressed it, I'm positive I stressed it because I've always considered candidness to be one of my more endearing traits. "I was a kid," I said, "desperate to win in any situation." Is not the will to win simply the fear of regret? If so, maybe the story wasn't a total waste of time?

"And maybe you too," I continued, snatching up one of his rooks with one of mine, "maybe you hate to lose just as much as I do." He'd blown the opportunity to initiate the exchange from what I interpreted then as a fear of losing one of his two rooks. He shied away, relying on the passivity I'd shown in the game up until that point. After I took his, he naturally took mine, leaving me in a control of the board that I would not, from that moment on, relinquish. Eight or so moves later, he was mated.

His king lay on its side, not still, but moving ever-so-slightly back and forth on its circular base, the metal grooves making a hollow noise against the wood surface of the board. "You know what," he said, as the smile spread over my face, "I think you're way off on that one." He held his eyes on me. I tried to maintain my smile, but as soon as the muscles in my face strained to keep it alive, I betrayed nervousness. I knew, from this uncharacteristically sustained look and his remark, that a judgment on my character had been cast, the nature of which I was not one-hundred percent sure about. As I lay in bed that night, I began to think of how I would go about correcting the judgment, if there was one, and assuming, as I did, that it was not in the least bit favourable. That's not to say I didn't consider the alternative: perhaps he was, after all, a sore loser.

2

A total of two years, give or take a day or two, elapsed from the day I followed the procession of my peers in the humanities down the aisles and up to the podium in the largest auditorium on campus, to the day I moved into the room across from Vincent's in the run-down home on Barton Street. That afternoon when I received my rolled and red-ribboned degree was now two years and almost three months past. But I was in the habit of awarding the day I moved into Barton Street with a special significance. I thought of it as a turning point. I liked to think that I would always see that day as a turning point, a proper end to one chapter ready for scrupulous analysis, and the beginning of another that itself would be, in due time, ready for an analysis all its own. I chose to think of it as a turning point because in the nearly three months since moving into that place, in this short time, I had already convinced myself a change was transpiring that I was quick to label as positive. Now, looking back on it, I can still see the day, if I choose to, as a turning point, although I don't know what good that would do me.

Those were bad years, the ones immediately following my graduation from the drama program. I was glad to be done with them. But as I just mentioned, it had recently become another habit of mine to go over them, to analyze them, to re-conceive them in my mind again and again. During the two years themselves it was my habit to reassess the four years of my Bachelors degree; as soon as I moved into the house on Barton Street, there was a changing of the guard, so to speak. No longer was I satisfied to chart my drama program days and its most salient element – my relationship with Lara. In my mind's tireless efforts to compartmentalize my experiences, those four years had now been shelved, and a new file was open and under review, one I'd privately labeled "The

Bad Years.” So, as the new chapter began, I was only then beginning my efforts at trying to make sense of the previous one, an activity I recall indulging in while sitting before my window on that long Sunday evening before returning to school for the second time . . .

After the ceremony, photographs were taken of Lara and me on the field outside Convocation Hall. We stood together in our black robes as Lara’s mother and father and my mother snapped the series of pictures I still have stuffed away somewhere in a blue shoebox. Beside a tree trunk, not too far away, lurked my father; he was apprehensively timing his approach so that it would coincide with a moment when my mother, newly his ex-wife, was distracted. He eventually found his moment, praised the both of us, but was far too perturbed about the proximity of my mother to do anything else. So he hurried off, while the five of us – Lara, myself, my mother, and Lara’s parents – walked to a nearby restaurant to eat lunch.

It was a beautiful June afternoon. When the parents went their separate ways after lunch, we returned to Lara’s apartment, walked into her bedroom, undressed, and had sex. I was already noticing how her interest in kissing was waning. Sex, too, had become her own personal sprint to the finish. The sex after graduation was no exception. She almost immediately positioned herself on top before quickly bringing herself to orgasm, and when her legs were more or less relaxed, when her toes had stopped their curling, she rolled her warm body onto the other side of the bed, and, with a flushed complexion, she quietly settled into herself, while I was left to anxiously contemplate her impending two month long trip to Europe with a girlfriend.

As for my father’s exclusion from lunch that day, this is probably less significant in light of the fact that I was living with him at the time, and so I saw him with far more

regularity than I did my mother. At the outset of my final year of university, while out for dinner with my father and brother, my mother unexpectedly moved out from our home, leaving no trace of herself behind except for three notes carefully folded and placed atop our pillows, not exactly three duplicates, but each still revealing in the same vague way, and in the same blue cursive, her motives for leaving. The three of us lived on in that home for nearly a year. I had never seen my father eat macaroni and cheese before, but that year, while living in the house together, I watched him eat more of this meal than I ever thought humanly possible. My mother, meanwhile, was not comfortable with the three of us carrying on in that house together; in her legal battles with my father, she was eventually the victor in her campaign to have the house sold as soon as I graduated. One week after accepting my degree, the three of us moved out.

We were not in the least prepared for how difficult the move would be. In fact, we only barely made it out alive. When a four-person family occupy a four-storey home for over twenty-four years, things tend to accumulate. Mountains of possessions. What also must be factored in are the emotional states of the three individuals responsible for such a move, how when faced with this gigantic home and its infinitude of objects – from the finger-curl size of a miniature soldier to the most unwieldy of armoires – a total and debilitating ennui began to spread through each of us, really, for the entire month leading up to the move. Putting ourselves into “fifth gear” had become an impossibility, meaning unopened packages of garbage bags were stacked for weeks in the corner of the kitchen, and yet-to-be-assembled boxes were laid out for days at a time on top of the dining room table. The permanently closed door of the basement storage room was something not one

member of the household could pass by without a shudder. To say nothing of the great piles of junk that began to appear on our front lawn before each garbage day.

When moving day arrived, the three of us wandered around our home, confused, like weary exiles in a displaced persons camp, while the hired men speedily boxed the kitchenware and filled the two trucks with furniture – one to drive to my father's new condominium, the other to go on to the two-bedroom apartment I would share with my brother for two years. Yet even after relocating to our new places, the move was still not complete. For at least a week afterwards, frequent trips were made back to the house. Our keys continued to work and there were still a considerable amount of leave-behinds. This did not change the fact that the legal date marking the transfer of ownership from my parents to the young couple who purchased the home had long since passed.

We were definitely aware of them. The husband's sleek black BMW convertible parked on the street opposite those piles of junk was not an uncommon sight in the days leading up to the scheduled move date, which my father more than once pushed forward. It looked as if he were on a stakeout. None of this fazed us, however, until one trip in particular – mine and my family's last – when I clearly received and registered the signal that it was no longer lawful for us to treat that house as though it were our own. I returned for unspecified reasons when I noticed, to my left, on my way through the front hall and into the kitchen, a small and ruffled rug laid out on the floor of the dining room, accompanied, indispensably, by an empty bottle of wine and two long-stem glasses. I walked into the kitchen and picked up the telephone when I heard the sound of someone mounting the front steps. Behind the white-laced curtain of the door I could distinctly make out the figure of the young husband turning his key. When he saw me, he stopped

dead in his tracks, directly under the light in the front hall. Then I stood up, unplugged the telephone, and wound the wire tightly around it before wordlessly skirting past him, out the front door and down the front steps for the final time.

That was June. In July, one month into the lease with my brother, Lara and her girlfriend left on their backpacking tour of over a dozen major European cities. Six weeks later, in August, in order to quiet my suspicions that my girlfriend of almost four years had stopped feeling anything for me, I myself took a much more impulsive trip to Europe, intercepting the two travelers in Barcelona. It was planned, obviously; but my desperation was so stubborn that I completely disregarded Lara's undeniable yet ultimately too passive uncertainty about the whole thing. I deemed the inevitably hasty, irrational, and decisive trip, a necessity. And not once while making my travel plans did I stop to consider how the idea came to be, that its genesis occurred at 4am while delirious, sleepless, paranoid, four hours before I was expected to arrive at the construction site where I had been working as a petty labourer for a contractor my father knew from the tennis club.

My memories of that trip have always remained vague and elliptical. The trip's trajectory followed Spain to the Netherlands to Germany to Italy to Belgium to France to England and then home again. I was with Lara and her friend for barely a week, meeting them in Barcelona, only to part ways in the Amsterdam train station six days later. Those six days were a disaster, in terms of what I hoped would happen versus what actually did happen. My initial suspicions, rooted in the impersonal tone of her content-less emails, were validated, not quieted, as soon as we found each other in the Barcelona airport. Lara was not thrilled to see me. In the six days that followed, we did not sleep together once.

The friend, Denise, quietly and effectively shunned all my attempts at intimacy with Lara by never once leaving us alone together. This must have been the strategy they conceived of beforehand, one which they mobilized immediately and continued to execute expertly throughout our short time together.

Ironically, out of the two of them, the one I was to find a pocket of time alone with was Denise. Lara had decided to turn in early one of the nights in Amsterdam. Not being tired, I naturally suggested to Denise that we go for a drink together, just the two of us. We found a pub on a cul-de-sac and remained there for almost an hour before making our way back to the hostel in time for its curfew. Our conversation must have been so ordinary since I haven't the slightest recollection of it. What I've always remembered is that she looked modestly attractive in the dim lighting of the bar that night, the interior of which resembled a beloved log cabin. She was – I would imagine still is – rather petite. In certain lights the plainness of her features made her something homely. Those pale blue eyes of hers had this unbecoming effect in brighter settings. But I'd been learning that the longer one stared at Denise, the stronger was one's desire for her, and I believed it was because she lived with an acute and healthy desire herself, which she couldn't help but subtly reveal in her body and the way she smiled. For a good while after that night, I often wished I'd made an advance at some point during our walk back to the hostel, a particularly vain wish, I think, for a heartbroken young man.

A trip to a tourist-trap sex museum where I took a photo of the two of them posing on either side of a life-sized wax figure of a flasher whose beige trench-coat is parted by his unreasonably large erection. A trip to the attic of the home where Anne Frank composed her diary in secret. The museum of Vincent Van Gogh, where I tried

very hard to commune with a canvas depicting an overturned crab. The Amsterdam train station, where the three of us parted ways – they were off to Paris for the final three days of their trip, while I was in possession of an open-ended ticket. “Why didn’t you warn me before I came all the way out here to meet you? It would’ve saved me a lot of time and money.” To which there was no real response. “Just tell me, please, if you’ve slept with anyone else. I need to know.” But as I pursued it right up until the last moment, she denied it right up until the last moment, with Denise right there by her side. I watched them, two backpacks with legs, as they disappeared into the station. Then I looked up at the schedule and selected Berlin.

For just under two months I traveled from Berlin to Munich, through Italy, and then back to the north of Europe again for brief stop-ins in Belgium, France, and England. Only rarely was I able to curb my mind from its infatuation with the idea of having had and having squandered something precious and unrepeatable. So shamelessly did I indulge this lovesickness. So shamelessly, in fact, that I construed these sustained pangs to which I was a constant and welcome host as something distinguishing me from the common throng. Have you, I would silently ask – the tubercular German waiter, the burly and pockmarked hotel proprietor in Brussels – have you ever loved and lost? Do you, American couple gazing at *The David* in Florence, do you know what it’s like to hear, to hear and to understand so completely that it resonates to the very depths of your soul, the lyrics of Leonard Cohen, and The Beatles? So there was regret and there was pride, and the two of these mingled inside me as I wandered from place to place, taking photographs, eating, writing journal entries fraught with emotion, reading, sleeping in hostels, in dormitory-style rooms crowded with other avid sightseers, who, like me, made

vain attempts to ignore, or, in other cases, were having too much of a good time to recognize the terrible boredom of traveling, of wearing a backpack and of camaraderie with strangers and of clinging, at all costs, to that tenuous and monotonous sense of wonder.

As for specifics, I could always handpick from a moderately extensive catalogue: being swindled out of one hundred Euros by a gang of Turkish conmen around Berlin's Museum Island; an almost lethal case of food poisoning while staying with a friend of my brother's in Paris; spending time with and being enamoured of a politically fired-up group of high-schoolers in the old Belgian city of Bruges; spending time with and being both enamoured and terrified of an Italian beggar in Assisi; being violently woken in the middle of the night by the sitting up and prolonged scream of a Frenchman, a scream he must've begun in his dream and which terminated in that dormitory-style room in Sienna.

I could also assist these reflections by fetching the black album of photographs from the bottom left drawer of my desk, an aid I do remember making use of on this particular occasion. There were no photos of myself or anyone I met during my travels, that is, except for Luca, the Italian beggar in Assisi. There was one of him striking a martial-arts pose on the street where we met. There was another of him reclined on that hill by the ruins of a medieval castle, his head resting against his backpack, while his scraggly dog lies beside him with its head nestled underneath his left arm. In both photographs he wore his filthy blue parka and a burgundy toque which went fully around his head so that only his unshaven face was exposed. Shortly after returning from Europe, I went to a cafe and wrote a letter and sent it, along with these photographs, plus the one taken the next morning, where he is without his parka and without his toque, to his

mother's address, which he gave me at the foot of the steep road winding down from that mountain town. He and another beggar were about to catch a bus to see a priest who had made a pledge to help them.

The words I wrote that day surely betrayed feelings of guilt and nostalgia disproportionate to an encounter of such fleetingness, which is probably why I never heard back, assuming he got the letter. We met while I was wandering the streets at mid-day. He spoke perfect English. After purchasing bread, cheese, and wine, I convinced him not to settle on a restaurant's patio like he wanted, but to go instead up to the hill by the ruins of that castle where I had wandered all the previous afternoon. It was only once up there, once removed from the town, that I felt safe from being associated with this man. He was already quite drunk when we met, and as he continued to guzzle the bottle of white wine, he began to speak his wild thoughts and experiences in an emphatic and uninterrupted stream of English words, while I could do nothing but watch and listen.

When night fell, so did coherency: it seemed as if he were channeling spirits. He began to quote from Revelations. He chastised me for idly tearing grass from the earth. He announced his prophecy, again and again, that a flood would come and swallow up Italy, while the rest of the world would remain as it was. All this time, as his dog slept, I could do nothing but watch and listen in naive admiration and in fear until the young Mexican couple stumbled up the hill to where we were sitting. At first they seemed interested, but as soon as Luca started to go on again, as he displayed for them various martial-arts poses, the Mexican couple started to look at me almost sympathetically. I have never been able to stand sympathy. So upon reading it in their looks, I quickly gathered my belongings and walked back with them to town, feeling in myself the urgent

need to explain as best I could why it was I felt compelled to spend my afternoon and early evening with a raving lunatic.

I returned home in October to the apartment I shared with my brother and soon got a job working as an usher at a comedy club, its owner also a member of the tennis club. It wasn't long before I arranged a rendezvous with Lara. The last time I'd seen her was in the Amsterdam train station, when I watched her and Denise walk away with their oversized backpacks. Seeing her again after so long an absence was just another reminder of what I considered to be her singular beauty. Her father's ancestry can be traced to the Ukraine, but it's her British mother whose looks she inherited: blonde hair, fair skin, big, light brown eyes.

During our dinner, her obstinacy at last yielded to mine when, after polishing off her gin and tonic, she set the drink down, took a deep breath, and began to enumerate, in great detail, and not without some pleasure, the multiple sexual encounters she had had while on her grand tour with Denise. On my way home – nauseous, dizzy, turned-on – I got into a bicycle accident, after which I was quickly rushed by a taxi-cab to the nearest hospital's emergency room where I received ten stitches to the bloody gash along my forearm. She said she “felt relieved” after divulging her experiences to me, that she was “glad to have gotten it off her chest.” I reported all this to the doctor as he stitched up my wound.

I was eventually fired from the comedy club after being accused of stealing money from the till. I didn't dispute the charge laid against me because it was true: a coworker with baggy pants had assured me his scheme was foolproof before gracelessly slipping a red fifty-dollar note into my hand, which I promptly stuffed into my pant's

pocket. I probably wouldn't have disputed the charge had it been fallacious. The place was a version of hell, and to have stayed any longer than I did would have had serious repercussions on my mental health.

For the next year and longer I worked several, more tolerable jobs, three restaurants and one antique furniture store. These were forgettable months of prolonged stagnation. It was the time I began to develop I.A.D. My brother and I were not getting along – he had his girlfriend and I did not have his understanding. In my daily efforts at identification, I would listen over and over to popular love songs. I was writing poetry about Lara and the odd meandering short story which invariably took for its setting whatever job I happened to be working at the time of its production. Each night, while lying in bed, I would formulate half-baked plans to ditch town and begin a new life in some U.S. city – New York or San Francisco. Another summer passed, this one far more uneventful. One unbearably hot day, while flipping through an album of old photographs, I impulsively ran to a photo store and had one blown up, then ran to a framing store to have it framed. It was a photograph of Lara standing before the oval-shaped mirror in the bathroom of the apartment I shared with my brother, taken days before she left on her trip. In it, she wore a black zip-up sweater over a turquoise turtleneck. Her eyebrows were raised. Forehead creased. Hair tied back. And running in a vertical line from the small purplish fold of fatigue below her big, brown left eye was a thumb smear of white skin cream which faded right around the corner of her mouth. I sent this to her, along with a cryptic note, but never received a response, understandably.

In the winter of our second year, my brother and I decided we would split up when the lease expired that June. In mid-May, I bumped into my old classmate and future

roommate, Matthew, at the bar where he was working. I told him about the difficulties I was having finding a new apartment. But it was only much later, after both of us saw and agreed to ignore the black cockroach that scurried out from underneath the mixed greens crowded beside my sandwich, it was only then, after we watched it disappear behind the bar, that Matthew stubbed out his cigarette and leaned his hulky frame forward. I waited uncomfortably until finally, with both blue eyes staring squarely into mine, he told me about the spare room on the top floor of the house where he was living. He even invited me over for dinner that very evening so I could see the room.

I didn't realize until I showed up that night that the house stood directly across the street from the Anglican private school where I spent much of my youth, seven years, from grades four until ten. The house's front lawn was laid with brick, with tufts of grass coming out between every crack. An emaciated-looking, undignified tree with crooked limbs barely stood in its centre. The front door did not seem to have a functional lock, nor could it be closed properly. I climbed the creaking steps, caked with dust and grime, until I reached the second floor landing. There were at least a dozen pairs of shoes laid out helter-skelter on top of what may have been a grey mat. To my right was the sunroom, which looked more like a makeshift greenhouse with its many hanging plants. After walking into the main floor bathroom, I found a log of shit floating in the toilet. When I removed the top of the butter tray on the kitchen counter, I found a parched, halved, discoloured onion. That's when I heard the front door swing open, bang shut, followed by some heavy thumping up the stairs. There, as I stood on the threshold of the kitchen, was Vincent, holding a case of beer, while behind him, looming over him, was big Matthew, carrying in his hands a fish wrapped in newspaper, and a plastic bag filled with what

looked like potatoes. “Can you believe these shoes?” Vincent said, gesturing down at the floor below.

It was decided: I would move in on the first of June or shortly after, not that those kind of particulars mattered to the residents of 33 Barton Street. No lease would be signed, no key would be copied. What’s the purpose of a key when the front door can’t fully close? All I was told was that the landlord, Harjeet, would come by the house to collect the rent checks on the first of the month. Meanwhile, Matthew was ardently cooking up the welcoming feast. I sat on a stool at the kitchen counter, watching. And Vincent? He had run upstairs to his room with an ardour all his own, after having shoved the beer into the fridge.

That night the three of us got drunk together in the kitchen until our numbers increased when Elyce – Matthew’s girlfriend – showed up with several cans of imported beer, and later on one of Vincent’s bandmates appeared on the landing in weathered brown cowboy boots. This was Colin, a slender guy with a big, bushy head of blonde curly hair. He wore a tight-fitting cowboy shirt with a matching floral design on each shoulder to go with the boots. The night was accompanied by the constant musical clangor of bottles being removed from the fridge. Matthew, whose room was adjacent to the kitchen, put on some records. Colin used his fingers and his arms, in fact his entire body, especially his face, to mimic the bass line to more than a few songs by the Talking Heads. At Elyce’s request, Matthew fetched his guitar and played out a succession of traditional blues chords while Colin belted out crude, improvised lyrics, and I was so drunk that only belatedly did I notice that Vincent had long ago secluded himself upstairs, behind his bedroom door.

Weeks later, sometime after the first of June, I moved all my belongings into that room in 33 Barton Street. As that afternoon turned into the evening, I was unexpectedly seized by a very acute melancholy, and after a few drinks with an old friend, compelled by this emotion, I ventured back to the apartment I had just moved out from. I still had my key, and I knew the landlord had yet to secure new tenants. The place was almost all white. This was even more emphasized without the furnishings. In a few rooms the cornices were painted a baby blue, as were the banisters, as well as the railing on the front porch. But not my old bedroom – its walls, its chilled floor, the ceiling, even the window curtain was the same shade of institution-white, so that it was difficult for the eye to register where the walls ended and where the ceiling and floor began.

I walked up to the top floor, which my brother once had all to himself. His former office had the thickest carpet in the apartment. Its window looked out onto our enclosed back patio, which itself looked down on a narrow alleyway below. I lay down on the carpet of his old office and gradually allowed myself to become very upset. I was stretching my mind for something, anything, and was only able to remember how after one New Year's Eve, when 1998 turned into 1999, or it may have been when 1999 turned into 2000, in any case, as dawn approached, my brother and I, both equally disheveled, sat together on the couch in the living room watching "Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!" while saving our looks of shared distress for the commercial breaks. But apart from this I couldn't recall another single instance when I felt a kinship with my brother in the whole two years that we lived together. Two years. So I aroused the emotion, right there on the floor of his former office.

3

This image – my body curled up on the floor of my brother’s former office – always seemed to me like the appropriate way to end that two year saga. It was symbolic, I still believe, of my reconciliation with an immediate past from which I’d finally escaped. It’s no accident that, despite the angel’s instructions, Lot’s wife looks back on the burning city of Sodom: it’s human nature, or at least human nature as I think I might know it. In my case, I’d like to think I’ve enacted these instances of looking-back, or feeling-back, with impunity. But who’s to say that we’re not, at this very moment, being punished? But by who? The spurious tradition of psychoanalysis would have me believe that at each passing moment I’m being manhandled by forces of which I’m not even conscious. I was in therapy for one year, the year after moving out from Barton Street, and that was more than enough for me.

Although it may seem strange, I really was in the habit of trying to order this two year narrative in chronological fashion, beginning and ending with my special bookends: convocation ceremony and the crumpled heap on the carpet, or the day I moved into the room across the hall from Vincent’s. The key word, though, is *trying*, for even if I strained my hardest for chronology, if I massaged my brow as furiously as possible, or used the aid, as I did, of an album of photographs, even still I would invariably become sidetracked. And as frequently happens with the golfer when he’s driven the ball hard from the tee, in straining his eyes to follow the tiny, rapidly diminishing white dot sailing into the distance, the eyes fail him, and the ball gets swallowed up by the sky, the scenery all around; so I, while trying to follow this particular series of memories, would often

lose sight of its flight and become preoccupied indefinitely with the vast scenery in which it was contained.

My attention could suddenly turn to Joel, the session drummer I delivered couches with during my brief tenure at the antique furniture store, and I would be off recalling how, after a full morning of deliveries, my arms would be so weak that to lift a bag of marbles would've been too much of a strain; yet there I would be, in an unlit apartment stairwell, ascending those stairs backwards, hunched over, my fingers just barely holding onto the couch's bottom, while below me – terrified, red-faced, sweating – was Joel, the session drummer, gazing up and searching in my face – day after day he searched – for some indication that I *did* have that reserve of strength necessary to keep him from dying a grizzly death. From Joel I could turn back to the store itself, on a day when there were no deliveries, and find myself clearing heaps of scrap metal, cardboard, and plastic off the inoperative conveyor belt in the back stairwell, or stealing a catnap on one of the couches in the basement. And who knows where I could go from there. I could reach further and further back, to childhood or adolescence, or I could just as simply give myself over to a more unadulterated kind of imagination, whatever that means. I suppose I'm just trying to distinguish between recollecting with a writing implement and recollecting without one, myself recollecting now and myself recollecting then.

It must have been the latter half of that Sunday evening when the absolute quiet of the apartment was interrupted by a knock at my bedroom door. I had just seconds before picked up one of the bright orange course packets piled on my desk with the intention of familiarizing myself again with some of the material. After all, I was to return to school the very next morning. But I had sat at that desk long enough for one night, so I was glad

for the interruption. When I opened the door, Vincent was standing in the hallway, holding a cricket bat in his right hand, tossing a red cricket ball up and down with his left.

“Care for a game?” he said.

Vincent ran to the store to get cigarettes while I put some beer from the fridge into a plastic bag and we reconvened in the small park down the street from our house. The back entrance to the senior school where I spent seven years is behind this park, which is two same-sized patches of grass divided by a narrow path. There are six park benches, three on each patch of grass, and I sat on a middle one, in the shadow of the rectangular-shaped senior school, at the very top of which is the gymnasium. There the senior school loomed behind me, a literal and silent block of my past, while I looked south towards the lights and activity of Bloor Street, waiting for Vincent to return from the store. The night was mild, and the sky, I remember, was populated by many white clouds lit up by the full moon, with only glimpses of darkness between them.

Soon enough, turning west, I could see him strutting towards me with his cricket ball and his bat. At that point I stood up and suggested we walk to the baseball park on the grounds of my old elementary school, not far from my old home, and about a thirty-minute walk from where we were then, standing in the rectangular shadow of the senior school, underneath a night sky over which white, shifting clouds were superimposed. Vincent was in agreement, and so we set out northeasterly from there, with me leading, through the school’s parking lot, following exactly in reverse the route my father would take me each and every weekday morning from grades four until eight.

Along the way we drank much of the beer I took from the fridge. When we came to the foot of the steep road leading up the escarpment to Casa Loma, I recommended we

deviate slightly from my father's old route. So we did, walking a little bit east along the castle's low fortifications to a series of many steps, which we climbed, at least a hundred of them or more, and surrounded on either side by flower gardens, their colours subdued by the late hour. Upon reaching the cliff's ridge, we both turned around and looked down the escarpment. The street below us, Spadina, stretched all the way down to a waterfront obstructed by skyscrapers. In the distance, the tip of the CN Tower blinked its tiny red eye. To our right, much closer, the uppermost point of Casa Loma almost nicked a corner of the full moon, revealed for a moment by a break in the billowy sheet of nighttime clouds.

We walked the length of another small park, returning to a road which soon turned into a bridge. As we walked alongside the railing the cluttered mess of foliage on our right suddenly gave way to the openness of an expansive reservoir. Indeed, hurling the red cricket ball from the railing with all of one's strength would still not have covered much ground in proportion to this reservoir, which consisted of several green hills dotted with dandelions, huge flats of grass, a series of ten private tennis courts, a clubhouse, stone water-fountains, sandy jogging paths, a children's playground, and underneath the bridge's railing the mouth of a most sinister ravine stretching far and sinuously westward.

My old tree-lined street is only two blocks long. Somewhere across the four-lane street running east-west along the northern perimeter of the reservoir is where it begins, and a mere sixty-three houses later is where it ends. My old home still stands on the corner, number 63, bordered by another small street which comes to a dead-end right where our old garage still stands. "That's where I grew up," I told Vincent. We were standing on the sidewalk before the walkway leading up to the covered front porch. My

mother had recently told me about the changes being made to the house's interior. These changes were even featured in a local architecture magazine, along with pictures of the couple who bought it, and I can't say I very much appreciated the way my mother displayed the pages of this article to me as I sat in the dining room of her condominium, eating raspberries. The exterior, nonetheless, was then intact. And as it happens, after driving past it the other day, I'm happy to relate that the house continues to remain unchanged, albeit with a few minor differences in colour and structure, though nothing to conflict in any drastic way with my memory or old photographs.

"That dead-end over there," I said, "played host to a lot of games of street-hockey, let me tell you."

Vincent lifted the cricket bat and gazed up at its top and the clouds overhead. I'm not sure if I wondered then, but I definitely wonder now, what he was thinking. I wonder if he was saying to himself, *Why is this guy making me look and react to the house where he grew up? All I want to do is play cricket. Instead, I'm being led around the city by the Ghost of Christmas Past. And the best part is, it's not my past.* The point is, he really did look up at that bat for a while, I remember it well, until eventually I sensed he was about to break the silence, since he had this habit, nervous or otherwise, of taking a quick breath and holding it in the moment before speaking without provocation. This was an appropriate habit for someone who clearly found talking to be one of the most strenuous and even painful activities known to mankind. But with alcohol, I was learning, and would soon learn tenfold, even someone like Vincent found a way to loosen up.

“Now what I want to know is,” he said finally, balancing the cricket bat on the palm of his hand, “Is how far this baseball park is from where we’re standing right now. Can you give me a straight answer to that, or what?”

The three sticks of different length were firmly planted into the ground; behind them was part of a gravel path and then one red-bricked wall of the school, penitentiary-like in its stature. Vincent, with ball and bat, an unlit cigarette in his mouth, was walking with measured steps away from the sticks, away from the wall, towards the fence across the field. He stopped about fifteen feet from the sticks before dragging the heel of his shoe hard across the grass, making a short, horizontal line. I walked up to him with the two remaining bottles of beer. We were definitely drunk. He didn’t so much as walk with measured steps before making his line in the grass – it was more of a stagger. I handed him his beer. He shook his head and asked me to open it, after which I reached for the bat to free up one of his hands – he moved it away from my reach. The red ball, which he was tossing up and down, dropped with a thud to the dirt. He lit the cigarette, swung the end of the bat up against his shoulder, and snatched the open beer from my hand.

“So what do you know about cricket?”

“Next to nothing.”

“Alright. Well, for what we’re doing tonight, you don’t really need to know the ins and the outs of the game. But I’ll give you the basics anyway, just so you can maybe get a feel for how it’s played. The object, right, is for one team to score more runs than the other team, like most team sports in the world. Each team has eleven players made up of specialized batsmen, specialized bowlers, a couple all-rounders, and a wicket-keeper.”

“What’s a bowler, what’s a wicket keeper?”

“A bowler is your pitcher and a wicket-keeper is your catcher, to use the baseball comparison.”

“And what’s an all-rounder?”

“An all-rounder is someone who pitches and bats.” He took a long drink, wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, then stood the bottle on the ground. “Okay, so the batting side has to have two batsmen at once at either end” – he pointed the cherry tip of his cigarette from the sticks down to the line where we were standing – “and the idea is to hit the ball into the gaps in the field” – he pointed all around – “and run” – he trotted towards the sticks then back again – “and run, crossing ends with the other batsman. And the fielding team is trying to get the batting side out for as few runs as possible. It sounds confusing, you just have to watch it a couple times. As for tonight, like I said, we don’t really need to talk about the ins and the outs. I just thought I’d give you a little summary. Tonight we’re just going to be bowling and batting.” He picked up his beer and I followed behind him as we walked over to the sticks. “The object of batting is to protect your wickets and score runs when you can.”

“Wickets?”

“The sticks, the sticks are the wickets. Now there’s basically two main types of shots, vertical and horizontal bat strokes, and within those two main categories there are many different strokes. When playing the vertical strokes, the key is” – he took a final drag of his cigarette, then ditched it – “I’ll get that later. What was I . . . ?”

“Vertical strokes.”

“Right, when playing vertical strokes the key is to never let your bat leave the line from your eye to the ball. In other words, never play a vertical stroke with your bat outside that line. Where’s the ball?” I gestured back to the line where he let it drop. “Can you get it?” I got the ball. “Now stand over there and hold it open-faced towards me at around waist level.” He stood his beer on the ground again, put both hands on the grip of the bat, dug his feet into a stance, focused his eyes on my hand, and positioned the bat vertically in line with his eyes and the ball. He held it for a moment before collapsing the stance. “See what I’m saying? With horizontal strokes, you want to play those when the ball is too far away to be able to play it with the bat in line from the ball to your eye. Very important: if you decide to play a horizontal shot when the ball *is* right in line, then you’ll generally get tied up and fuck up and get out. You can stop standing like that.”

We exchanged bat for ball. He picked up his beer and led me back to the line in the grass. “Bowling, right? There’s fast bowlers who come running in from thirty yards away and try to get you with sheer pace. And then there’s spin bowlers, who get you with different spins once the ball hits the pitch.”

“Pitch?”

“The area directly in front of the wickets and the batsman.”

“Wickets?”

“Very funny. The most common type of bowling is swing bowling. It’s done by medium to fast-paced bowlers and they get the ball to swing right to left or left to right in the air, based on having one half of the ball shinier than the other half. In between deliveries they shine half the ball and because half the ball has less air resistance, it travels through the air faster and this creates a swinging effect.”

“What kind of bowler are you?”

“You’ll find out. Now go over there. And try to remember: you want to *protect* your wickets.”

I walked the fifteen feet or so with my beer and the bat and placed myself tentatively next to the wickets. I called out, “Hey, don’t these guys wear helmets and leg padding when they bat?”

“I won’t be bowling like those guys, so you don’t need to worry about that. What you should really be doing is standing sort of *in front* of the wickets.” He was yelling now for no good reason. “Try not to think of it as a baseball plate. They’re yours. You want to *protect* them. But right, since you don’t have any leg padding, you’d probably be better off staying where you are.” He lifted the bottle to his mouth and tilted his head back before tossing it somewhere onto the field. I could hear him mutter, “I’ll get that later.” At last, it seemed, he was holding a single object, and the way he was rolling it around the palm of his hand, the way he was smiling under that night sky covered with white clouds, it was as if this was the moment he had been waiting for this entire time. Meanwhile, I had grown a little concerned. There was the yelling, and that array of obscure terminology racing through my mind: vertical strokes, horizontal strokes, spin bowlers, swing bowler, fast bowlers, all-rounders. What the hell kind of sport was this? For courage, I did the same with my beer, guzzled it down and tossed the empty bottle somewhere out onto the field.

Vincent was suddenly about thirty yards from the line – fast bowler, fast bowler was the answer to my question – and before I could formulate a coherent thought let alone an escape plan he was leaping towards it with incredible speed. As he accelerated

towards the line his left arm swung like a windmill from the bottom of his torso and up over his head. I could just make out for what was a fraction of a second the quick flicker of his two brown eyes. The ball. The red ball was hurled from his hand with great force. It raced towards me and just about the point when it hit the dirt, or pitch, I forgot entirely about the bat, the wickets, vertical strokes, horizontal strokes, and turned my body completely around as the red ball shot up from the pitch, just about plunging itself into the small of my back.

The pain was astonishing. I dropped the bat and did what I always do when experiencing the immediate shock of a pain so unbelievable as this one: I ran, away from the field, down a concrete hill, and across the coloured lanes of the running track below. I ran as though my head was on fire. I bolted across the grass in the middle of the track and collapsed near one of two yellow goal-posts. I crawled on my stomach towards it, in an effort to be as near as possible to something strong and unmovable. When I had the base of it within my grasp I sprawled out on my stomach, turned my cheek onto the cool grass, and right before my eyes were Vincent's worn-out sneakers.

"That was going straight for the wickets," he said.

"That wasn't fair," was my response.

We were sitting upright, each with our backs against our own yellow goalpost, both of us facing the red buildings of the school. The pain in my back was gradually subsiding as Vincent smoked cigarette after cigarette down to the filter, putting the butts into the plastic bag he had somehow recovered, along with the two empty bottles we had cast onto the field before the bowl that struck my back. It must have been the alcohol

coupled with the activity of his favourite sport that was making him speak and smoke so compulsively. Every now and then a car would speed by on the street behind us, halting for a mere moment the veritable monologue he had begun almost instantly upon sitting down by his post, right after muttering an apology for just about permanently embedding a red cricket ball into the flesh of my back. He was going on about the best cricket game he'd ever seen, and although I couldn't share or even fully comprehend his excitement, I was still glad to be listening to him as he went on and on about what was definitely a passionate interest of his, while I recovered from my injury.

“Had to be New Zealand versus South Africa, South Africa tour of New Zealand. Played in Napier I think. I don't remember what New Zealand scored in their innings, maybe two-fifty or so. But South Africa had got about one-eighty or one-ninety or so and they were going along strong, looking like they'd make two-fifty-one to win. Sean Pollack was batting for South Africa and looking really good. He'd already hit a couple six's, that's a homerun pretty much, a hit over the fence for the maximum number of runs a batter can get in one hit. So then he smashed a shot high and deep. New Zealand's Nathan Astle was fielding at deep, long off, and started bolting to try and make the catch. He must've run fifty yards, did a huge leaping dive, and the ball stuck in his left hand . . . he's right-handed. He got up and threw his hat off like he just graduated and got mobbed by his teammates. It's hard to explain the catch except to say it's the best catch I've ever seen in my life. Anyway, that was it for Sean Pollack, at which point South Africa were two-hundred or so for about seven wickets. So New Zealand had to get three or more batsmen out and South Africa needed fifty runs or so to win. And they only had two overs to get those runs. An over is when a bowler bowls six consecutive balls from one

end. After that's done, a different bowler bowls six consecutive balls from the other end. Whatever, it doesn't matter. So the new batsman for South Africa was Lance Klusner, number sixty-nine, and he looked good right away. Anyway, it came down to the last over where South Africa needed thirty runs or so off six balls. And Klusner just went insane. He hit the first three balls of the over for six I believe and then he hit two four's so they needed four runs off the last ball to win. New Zealand's Dion Nash was bowling, who I had sat behind at the movies earlier that year when I went over with my Dad to visit his family. Anyway, that really doesn't matter. To make a long story short, Nash botched it and threw Klusner a full toss and he smashed it into the crowd for six and South Africa won. It's hard to say why but it was truly an amazing game."

What language was this? The language of a cricket-lover. On our walk back home, he was still going, having moved onto individual players, reciting who were his favourites and why. Meanwhile, my thoughts – and could I be blamed? – had begun to drift away from all this talk. I kept pace as we walked, back along the route we'd taken several hours before, alongside the railing overlooking the reservoir, down the hundred or more steps over from Casa Loma. The night had grown considerably cooler, and the clouds had all but disappeared by then, so it was quite dark. It being well past 2am, the few cars that were about were moving at a suspiciously cautious speed, which certainly enhanced the lurid glare of their headlights.

The first time I met Vincent was not while standing on the threshold of the kitchen in 33 Barton Street as he appeared on the second-floor landing holding a case of beer, followed directly by Matthew, who himself held the potatoes and the snapper

wrapped in newspaper. During my final year of university, Vincent had actually rented out one of the rooms in Lara's apartment for what was probably a total of six months, from the beginning of the winter to the end of the summer. I didn't spend a whole lot of time over there that year, but whenever I did, he and the brunette he was dating, Nadine, were usually behind his bedroom door. There was one occasion when he emerged from his room and began shifting about the kitchen while I watched the Oscars with Lara and her two roommates, who were also learning to act in the drama program. He didn't utter a single word, nor did he look at us, as he walked from the kitchen to his bedroom carrying two large glasses of ice water. I pulled a face and Lara elbowed me, saying "What? He's quiet." There was another occasion when he had uncharacteristically left the apartment without shutting his bedroom door, and I seized the opportunity to peer inside. What I saw was a very tidy room dedicated to music. At least three mini-towers of systematically stacked CD's, two large, rectangular speakers, and a handsome acoustic guitar leaning upright against its black stand. The bed was made, but not meticulously. That's around the time I started to ask questions, and I learned, from Lara, that he was in a rock band.

In early July of 1998, before she left on her trip to Europe, Lara performed in a children's play for which Vincent and his band's drummer provided the musical accompaniment. The play was put on by her two roommates, Angie and Emily, as part of an annual summer theatre festival. From the second year of our relationship right up until its end, those three – Lara, Angie, and Emily – lived together in the same apartment, with the fourth bedroom continually rented out to transients. The tenant who remained the longest (one year I think) was James, an amateur theatre director best known for saying "wait'll they get a load of me" without the faintest trace of irony. In the heyday of my

drama degree, many parties were thrown at that residence. Those were the days of poetry readings and all-night drama parties. One of these, I recall, was appropriately dampened when James burst out of his room in nothing but a pair of underwear and a fluffy mauve scarf and proceeded to summon everyone to the living room for his lengthy rendition of *Mein Herr* from *Cabaret*, during which his nose began bleed profusely.

Angie and Emily had formed their very own theatre troupe. They had already mounted one play, a meta-theatrical adventure story which served as a mouth-piece for the two chief principles of their shared life-philosophy: monogamy stinks, magic mushrooms are great. That summer they were trying to spread the gospel to children, albeit a watered-down one. So I was beginning to see the drummer at the apartment an awful lot. He was a wily kind of guy, far too friendly. After discovering a very courteous note he had placed under Lara's door requesting her presence in the living room where he and several others happened to be hanging out, I deemed it necessary to go and see the band play.

What I then considered a reconnaissance mission took place at a small venue in the back room of a pub sometime in late June of 1998, shortly before the premiere of the children's play (its title was an amalgamation of three different farm animals, a cow, a chicken, and a pig, I think). With their eyes to the ground, the four members of the band – two guitarists, a bassist, and a drummer – took up their instruments and played a grand total of four songs before they started bumping into each other. The set officially ended when Vincent fatally stabbed the kick-drum with the neck of his guitar; then he dropped the guitar; the other guitarist kicked over an amp; a cymbal tipped, crashed, and they all left the stage without a word, only to return minutes later to pack up their gear, restoring

order to the stage by moving everything off it, and coiling the wires, and generally comporting themselves as though nothing out of the ordinary had transpired.

All I had were four songs on which to base an opinion. But this was enough for me to reach the verdict that what I had seen was a bona fide rock band. Three out of the four members dressed identically, which was more or less the uniform of all the male spectators in attendance that night, excluding myself: tight dark jeans with a neat fold at the ankle, worn-out Converse sneakers, uncombed hair, close-fitting button-up shirts that, if you looked closely, had at least one safety-pin in the place of a missing pearl button. What made the band so idiosyncratic was their out-of-place bassist, Colin – with his cowboy shirt and cowboy boots, he would've been far less conspicuous in a Hank Williams cover band.

The music itself was structured around periods of calm (characterized by hypnotically morbid, repetitious guitar riffs, a slow drum beat, and an elementary bass line) interrupted by sudden bursts of tumultuous sound (spiraling guitars and inspired drumming). In this calculated chaos – they were described by the weekly papers as purveyors of “math rock” – Colin didn't so much play his bass guitar as he wrestled with it, like it was an anaconda. Peter, the wily drummer, at some indefinite point doffed his shirt; and at one point he even got up from behind his drum-kit to pace anxiously around the stage, rhythmically beating his drum-sticks against the side walls before returning to his stool, drenched in sweat.

Their fourth and final song, since seeing and hearing it that night, has always remained clear in my memory. The drummer began, manufacturing the sound of a metronome by hitting one of his sticks against the side of his snare-drum. One guitar

came in, Vincent's; carefully, with his head down and his body slouched, he plucked a series of around fourteen solemn notes. He repeated the same fourteen as the metronome kept steady pace. At the start of the third repetition of this series of notes, Vincent's guitar and the metronome suddenly sped up, while the other guitar started to make subtle noises. When this series was complete, another began, the fourth. This time, the guitars again sped up, the kick-drum was added on top of the metronome sound, which had also sped up significantly because the drummer was hitting the edge of his snare-drum now with both sticks. Then the cymbals. Then, for six seconds, maybe six, the sounds from the other instruments abruptly ceased, and there was only Vincent's guitar in an otherwise dead-silent room speeding through the fourteen notes again, immediately succeeded by the suspension's collapse – the sudden burst of tumultuous sound. That is precisely the point when Vincent began to sing. I couldn't positively make out what he was saying. Although there was one line, one line in particular that, since he kept repeating it, was made intelligible to my perked-up ears.

I went to see the band several more times throughout that summer, before I left on my own trip to Europe, though I was never bold enough to approach Vincent or even Peter for that matter to officially recognize the terms on which we were acquainted. On those subsequent occasions, I was able to see how the band properly terminated a show: Peter would toss the top of his cymbal like a discus towards the front of the stage and synchronized with its crash to the floor would be a final thrust of the guitars, followed by the extinguishing of the stage lights. Always met with spirited applause from the concert-goers. It was nearly two years after that summer when Matthew leaned his hulky frame forward over the counter of the bar and mentioned the spare room in his apartment with a

discreteness I didn't think was all that necessary, right after we'd tacitly agreed to leave the cockroach that crawled out from my side-salad unacknowledged. He also mentioned in passing the name of his other roommate, who happened to be a member of a popular local rock band. Had I heard of them?

It was in Amsterdam, while walking through the rooms where Anne Frank and her family and others at one time secretly eked out a short-lived existence, that I attempted to have a normal, unemotional conversation with Lara. I asked her whether or not she regretted moving her possessions back to her mother's house before leaving on her trip, and whether or not she would miss living with Angie and Emily. She had lived at that apartment long enough, she told me. And had Angie and Emily found someone to fill her room yet? Not to her knowledge. But they would have to fill two rooms, she said, considering Vincent had since moved into his own apartment with Nadine, the brunette, his girlfriend. So when Matthew mentioned in passing the name of his roommate, I could only assume that Vincent's relationship, like mine, had recently fallen apart. And I was right.

Vincent, at some point during our walk home, had acquired a bag of cheese puffs from an all-night variety store. He crumpled the bag and darted up our driveway to stuff it in one of the garbage bins. I could hear him depositing the empty bottles into the recycling bin. I could hear him licking his fingers as he trailed behind me up the creaking stairs of our home. In the hallway between our bedrooms, I handed him back his cricket ball.

“Do you know what these are made of?” he asked. “Cork, string, leather, in that order, starting from its core. Plus this,” and he ran his cheese-stained fingertip along the outer seam. “Anyway, I’m real sorry about what happened. Truly, I am.”

I told him my back was only a little bit sore. I deliberated for a few seconds over what I would say next before deciding on what I wanted to say, which was not a statement of any kind but a question. “This may seem out of left field,” I said, “but it just came to me now. I’ve always wondered, in that song, when you keep repeating the line ‘I couldn’t stop it if I wanted.’ What exactly are you referring to?”

Vincent’s face flushed red. “Why?”

“No reason, really. It’s just something I’ve always been meaning to ask you.”

“Well it doesn’t refer to anything. It’s bullshit. Like the rest of my lyrics.” With that he said a curt goodnight and shut his bedroom door with some force while I remained for a moment in the hallway, trying to figure out if that flush in his face was of a similar shade to that which crept over Lara’s in the Anne Frank attic, after I’d asked her how exactly she’d gotten word about Vincent moving into an apartment with his girlfriend.

PART TWO

Winter came early that year. My fall premonition that I would sometime in the future find myself looking through frosted window panes materialized sooner than I had thought. By December, I was plenty preoccupied with five undergraduate-level English courses, not to mention a part-time job working the cash at a very large and corporate bookstore. Ever since the first snow, which fell in late November, a family of squirrels had begun spending their mornings and evenings inside the walls of my bedroom. Every morning and every evening of that winter – from late November to early April – I was tormented by the sound of their rambunctious activity, the scurrying and the scratching against the walls, and the squealing and squeaking they made with their throats. After I informed the landlord that something needed to be done immediately, he proceeded to ask me straight-faced whether or not I knew the hours at which the squirrels came and went; replying that this was information I wasn't privy to, he went ahead anyway and sealed up the chimney-top with steel wiring.

The squirrels continued to come and go at their leisure before I decided to take matters into my own hands. But after a representative of Animal Control visited the premises, he told me there was nothing he could do since the squirrels were gaining entry, not by way of the chimney top, but by way of the rooftop, which was in such a state of deterioration that it would have to be completely repaired – so said the representative – before any suitable action could be initiated to remove the squirrels. I knew from Vincent that it had taken this landlord weeks before he replaced the third-floor bathroom door with a hunk of wood stained with blood. So instead of demanding that the entire roof be repaired in the middle of winter, I chose to abstain from the paying of rent for the months of January and February. Whenever the landlord pleaded with me about

the so-called money owed to him, I promptly threatened to report my case to the appropriate offices, even though I had no idea what those were or where to find them.

The cashier job was proving to be the worst I had ever worked before. They hired me in late October as a seasonal employee in preparation for the forthcoming Christmas rush. Everyone at the store was obsessed with the Christmas rush. It took on the shape of a horrible, approaching, gigantic beast, with an even more gigantic purse, slouching towards all of us. Countless times I would overhear one or another longstanding employee recount with quiet concern how the year before the line had snaked all the way around the gardening section, through self-help, past computer-aid, and didn't end until the penultimate aisle of the magazine section. To make matters worse, and absolutely unrelated, was the fact that one was given a smiley-face sticker to go on a smiley-face employee card if an especially benevolent act of customer service was committed in the presence of one of the store's numberless managers. When the smiley-faced card was filled up, the hard-working employee was then permitted to reach his or her hand inside a manila envelope and remove one small slip of paper which revealed a gift of some sort – a chocolate bar, a CD, etc. After assisting an elderly lady load her purchases into her car, I returned to the store one day only to have the manager-on-duty stop me mid-stride and ask for my card. I stood beside him, shoulder to shoulder, as he carefully placed the only sticker I had ever earned onto that card. I watched afterwards as he keyed open a bottom drawer, took out a blue binder, and began to jot something down into the ledger of what could only have been the smiley-face sticker distribution logbook.

This kind of inane protocol was nothing out of the ordinary, nor was it unexpected considering the store, yet still, I couldn't help but become totally exasperated during my

shifts. At least there was my decision to return to school, at least I had that. I was enrolled in five courses. These courses were challenging and stimulating; better yet, there was a clear purpose to it all: I would rectify my past blunders in drama by pursuing with serious intent a career in academia, one calculated step at a time. In the process, who knows, maybe I might improve upon my talents as a writer. That is how I chose to look at my situation. As a non-degree student in a qualifying year, I was simply taking the first of those calculated steps. Squirrels in the walls and cashier job notwithstanding, I was moving in the direction of a proper, if not belated, adulthood.

Vincent worked a custodial job for the university. He had been working there ever since we were first acquainted. There were a number of young musician-types that had the same job washing dishes and cleaning floors in the same cafeteria designated for one of the residence halls on the eastern part of the campus. Several times throughout the later fall I would catch Vincent during a break, or I would come and bring about a break, and we would sit together on one of the benches along the outer walls of the cafeteria building, looking out onto a courtyard covered with fallen leaves. The campus was a quiet place in the fall. Vincent would smoke a cigarette or two and for as long as his break lasted we would look out at the students kicking around a soccer ball, or tossing a frisbee to one another, and the clusters of pretty girls sitting cross-legged or lying on the grass, using their backpacks like pillows. There would usually be very little talking since Vincent didn't enjoy talking, and since we both seemed to equally privilege the concord of unfamiliar voices, the sound of leaves underfoot, the wind shaking the ones on the trees that had yet to make their swaying drop. Some way over from us, groups of students loitered around the dull grey area by the front doors of the library. I was always catching

quick reflections of the sun glinting off the clean glass surface of an opening or closing library door.

It was some such day reminiscent of those of the later fall when I sat with Vincent during one of his breaks, looking out onto the courtyard. It was an afternoon inordinately warm for mid-December. I had some time to kill before my two hour Hawthorne seminar, so I strolled into the cafeteria. Vincent told me it would be a minute and I went outside to wait on one of the benches until he came out, still wearing his usual white custodial shirt. When he lit his cigarette, he told me about the band breaking up the night before. When he finished the cigarette, he brought up Nadine for the first time since we'd become such close friends.

"I was feeling real bummed-out after the meeting," he said. "I didn't feel much like hanging around and getting drunk with those guys, so I walked up to Giovanni's where she works, hoping she'd be there. And she was, but definitely not too thrilled to see me. It's not the first time I've gone in there the last couple months. Anyway, she didn't want to go for a drink after her shift like I suggested, but I kept insisting, telling her the band just broke up and all until in the end she agreed, I think to quiet me down more than anything and not to have to be involved in a scene in front of the customers and coworkers, since, I can't believe I'm telling you this, but there have been one or two incidents like that in the past. She was working the counter so I sat down and ordered a pasta and a drink even though I wasn't hungry or thirsty. The coworkers were giving me shifty eyes. I tried making it easier on her by pretending to read a magazine. And lucky for me, she got let off early, otherwise I would've had to stick around or wander around the area for a couple hours after eating, doing God knows what. Look, it's not worth

talking about, and I'm getting tired of it anyway, and I know you didn't ask, so I might as well just wrap it up and say we went to a bar and it was another fucking disaster. I just started launching into the same kind of crap I've been subjecting her to every now and then since we broke up. So no surprise she freaked out on me and left the bar, leaving me sitting there like a deadbeat with two half-full pints of beer in front of me and the bartender looking at me like I was totally messed up."

The whole time he talked he was leaning over his knees, scraping the dirt between the cobblestones of the path in front of us with a small stick he had picked up at some point beside the bench, while I focused my own attention across the courtyard, at the red sandstone columns of the old building where my classes were held. When he finished, he tossed the stick onto the grass and squinted up at those very columns, forlornly, before making his way back inside the cafeteria. Even though he looked as young as me and everybody else around us, that white custodial shirt precluded him from ever being mistaken for a student. Not that he wanted to be mistaken for a student. I think Vincent knew well enough that a high-school dropout is someone who has taken the requisite measures to stop being that very thing. I, on the other hand, soon after he left, walked across the courtyard. I walked inside, into a windowless classroom to sit with my pencil poised above a lined notebook while a sixty-five year old man grumbled on and on for two hours about Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale, "Roger Malvin's Burial."

On my way home after class that evening, I rented a movie that I thought I, and therefore Vincent too, would appreciate: Todd Browning's "Freaks" from 1932. When I entered the apartment, something caught my attention in the sunroom: leaning against one of the walls were four perfectly square fixed windows, about two-and-a-half feet by

two-and-a-half feet. I went in and examined them. Each square window, something like an inch in thickness, was comprised of two heavy pieces of insulated glass designed with faint geometric red lines, the kind of crisscross patterns one would find on high-school windows across the country. Around the edges of each square was a thin, protective layer of what felt to me like silicone.

I found Vincent on his bed, lying on his back but not sleeping. “What’s with those windows in the sunroom?”

“They’re for the construction of The Cube,” he said.

“The what?”

“The Cube.”

“And what’s The Cube?”

“Take a wild guess.”

“Where’d you get them?”

He took a deep breath. “Work. They’ve been lying around for weeks. Dave helped me bring them home. I work with Dave. He’s gone now. He lives nearby. That should cover the rest of your questions I think. What’s that in your hand?” I tossed him the movie. “Todd Browning’s ‘Freaks.’ For pure sensationalism,” he read, “‘Freaks’ tops any picture yet produced. It’s more fantastic and grotesque than any shocker ever written.”

“I was hoping we could watch it tonight, unless you have other plans.”

“Is that some kind of joke?”

“It wasn’t intended to be.”

“What kind of plans do you think a deadbeat like me would have tonight?” He waited. “Right, well we can’t watch the movie until we build The Cube, and we can’t build The Cube until there’s order downstairs. So I’m thinking a 10:30pm start time?”

The name we had for Vincent’s periodic and rigorous sweeps through the apartment was *order*, looney-toon-esque in how fast and effective it was, and if one were around, it was a spectacle not to be missed. When I made my way down to the kitchen that night, he was already scrubbing Matthew and Elyce’s portable steak grill. It was around late October when Matthew’s uncle gave to him something like two dozen frozen steaks of apparently high quality, and since then, almost every third night, the fierce scent of grilled cow meat would permeate the entire apartment. If either myself or Vincent desired to live without this smell for one day or two, we would have to take the initiative and scrub the grill ourselves. When it came to the sink area, Matthew and Elyce seemed to consider themselves amateur scientists able to conduct world class experiments simply by way of neglect.

When it was clean to his standards, he shelved it with some violence on top of the fridge. Next he slipped into a nearly mechanical mode while doing the dishes, nearly mechanical, for there was a slight melancholy to it, on account of the slight hunch of his shoulders. His two arms were like an assembly line: the clean dishes onto the rack, the dirty ones into the sink, where his eyes were fixed. Halfway through he pulled the drain, refilled the sink again with fresh steaming hot water and soap. I got up to dip my hand into the water, as a test, but had to remove it within seconds; and his were submerged in there for minutes at a time.

Once the dishes were done he wiped down all the counter tops thoroughly, in and around the sink, the stove-top, and where I was sitting – the kitchen counter. “You’re going to have to get out of here for a few minutes,” he said.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

He shook his head. “No. Just get out of the way.”

Out came the broom. He swept the kitchen and the hallway. As he swept, he filled up the sink again, this time creating the admixture of boiling hot water and Pine-Sol. The smell was potent. Any residue of grilled meat was quickly overpowered by the hot synthetic forest smell steaming up from the sink; and feeling a small but motivated headache brewing, I couldn’t tell which one was more disagreeable. The broom was returned to the closet. Now he was brandishing a mop (this may seem like an ordinary sequence of household chores unworthy of narration, and that may be true, but what is and what is not worthy of narration is a question I must put off indefinitely). In any case, I should stress, if I haven’t done so adequately already, that it was the compulsive speed at which he carried these chores out that made it such a spectacle for me.

The mopping was no exception, though there were moments when he would stop and begin to ruminate over a particular spot of grease. I had to practically dart out of the way when he moved his operation into the hallway. “Fucking shoes,” he said, before leaning the mop against the wall and within what seemed like seconds he paired them all up and arranged them into a neat pile so that I was finally one-hundred percent certain that, as I suspected, a ragged gray mat had been there, underneath, all along.

During the watering of the plants in the sunroom, his energy softened. He fingered the leaves ponderously; he stuck his fingers into the soil of each potted plant and

felt around, even rapped his knuckles against each hanging pot, placing his ear up to them as he did this to gauge the sound (what sound he was looking for, I can't say). Not until he was satisfied with these preliminary investigations did he retrieve and fill the purple watering can, after which he shifted back into a high gear; when I finally decided to go and pick up two falafels for the both of us, he was madly circling the sunroom with a large and powerful vacuum.

In this period of my life, every so often, when out in public, I would try to will a chance encounter with Lara by thinking about a chance encounter with Lara. This was to no avail, since I hadn't seen her for several months, and even then, at the opening of a play starring a mutual friend, it was not at all unexpected. Nevertheless, when I walked out again into the temperate air of that mild December evening carrying a brown paper bag holding inside of it two falafel sandwiches, I did see her, though only from behind, standing near the box-office of the reparatory theatre adjacent to the restaurant from which I had just emerged. She was speaking on her cell-phone, staring up at the calendar poster showing the theatre's schedule for the month of December. I heard her say, distinctly, "But tonight's the last night." As I turned to walk away, I made sure to look back and crane my neck as discreetly as possible at the theatre's marquee, which displayed a film I knew for a fact we had both seen for the first time together.

All the toiletries were laid out neatly at the foot of the bathroom door when I returned to the apartment, but Vincent wasn't there. I creaked up the stairs to find his bedroom door closed. Behind it, I could hear the muffled sound of his voice. Then the receiver being placed down. Then the release of the springs in his bed and the opening of

his bedroom door and the somewhat surprised look on his face when he saw me standing in the hallway between our two rooms.

“Falafel?” I said, lifting up the brown paper bag.

“In a minute. I just have to finish the bathroom.” He moved past me down the stairs. I walked into my own room, sat down at the edge of my bed, picked up the telephone, and dialed the symbol *, then 6, followed by 9. The automated voice told me the last number that had called my line was a private caller, a restricted number. I hung up the phone with a slight, only a very slight sensation of relief.

The construction of The Cube took approximately one full hour, during which I assumed the role of Assistant to Vincent. I gathered from his initial explanation, which was a rapid pantomime but for the odd power-drill noise and a whole lot of whistling, that he was planning to make it so that each square window was fixed to another, forming a cube-like structure; what the pantomime did *not* sufficiently explain was the utility of this structure, at that point still a mystery to me, although I guessed Vincent’s intention was to have The Cube remain in the sunroom as a kind of interesting but confounding piece of homemade furniture, a table perhaps.

My mind, meanwhile, had been temporarily put at rest by Vincent’s response to the questions I posed to him while we ate our falafels on the front porch of our home. These questions – had he ever seen Robert Altman’s “The Long Goodbye” and did he know it was just completing a run at the Bloor Cinema? – I somehow managed to phrase with the most casual tone. The answer was “no” to both, so I was now relieved to be holding the windows in place as he power-drilled them together with some difficulty. He had already acquired, God knows when, a few measured wedges of wood, as long as an

index finger and as thick as two, to serve as supports in each of the four inside corners. When these were drilled into place, the thing was complete. But not before some finishing touches. He ran up the stairs and raced back down, carrying a globe and positioned this globe inside The Cube, carefully, centering it very precisely on its base. He ran up the stairs and raced back down again, this time carrying a chess-board and he centered this with the same amount of meticulousness on the very top pane of The Cube. Then he removed the globe, the chess-board, rubbed each side, inside and out, with paper towel, Windex, and placed them back again.

I literally had to prop his head up with two pillows before taking my own seat on the floor of his bedroom and pressing play on the DVD player for our third and final activity of an evening where there had been absolutely no further mention of the dissolution of his band the night before or the events involving Nadine that followed. I don't really recall much of what we talked about. I do remember, at some point during the movie, Matthew thumping up the stairs and pushing open the bedroom door, not to thank Vincent for once again cleaning up after him and his girlfriend, but to demand an explanation for what kind of unexplainable construction was at present sitting in the centre of the sunroom. Vincent's silence elected me the speaker.

"The Cube," I said.

"Well I know I've told you two before that I plan to install a fireplace in there this winter. So at some point in the next month it's gonna have to go. What the fuck are you watching?"

"It's called 'Freaks.'"

"It's called 'That Makes Sense.'"

Vincent shot up and shut the door in Matthew's face, said "install a fireplace my ass" as he sat back down again. I don't doubt that Matthew was onto something. When the 30's era Hollywood movie featuring authentic sideshow freaks ended, we deemed it our favourite. The plot about a midget's love for a full-grown trapeze artist who feigns her own love to con him out of his large inheritance for some reason spoke to us, so profoundly, in fact, that we immediately, while the credits rolled, went onto ebay to order a poster, a modestly-sized yellow poster that had the midget, Hans, sitting on the lap of the trapeze artist, Cleopatra, with the tag-line above reading "Can a full grown woman truly love a midget?"

2

Christmas at the bookstore lived up to all expectations: every shift in the days leading up to the 24th, the line extending from the cashier counter kept growing and growing. The day of the 24th was one for the record books. By noon, the line snaked all the way around the gardening section, through self-help, past computer-aid, and didn't end until the very last aisle of the magazine section. The head manager-on-duty kept postponing my lunch break until I reached my wits end at 3:30pm, having only ingested a coffee the entire day, with the line showing no signs of abating. I closed down my station and announced to the coworker next to me that I was taking my lunch. Her expression was one of concern. And before I even made it out from behind the cashier counter, the head manager-on-duty accosted me. I told her, in a trembling voice, at once aware that some of the shoppers were looking, that I was taking what was rightfully mine – a thirty-minute lunch break in a seven hour shift. To which she responded that if I took my lunch then, unauthorized by her, I shouldn't bother coming back.

That night, in keeping with tradition, I joined my father and my brother for a dinner of Chinese food, followed by a trip to the movies, though I neglected to mention that my bank account, at that time a household plant for which my father was a bona fide horticulturist, would no longer be sprinkled every two weeks with the tiny wage from the bookstore. I returned in the late evening to an apartment bereft of roommates. Matthew and Elyce had gone home to their families. Vincent, whose family was living somewhere in the Eastern Townships, had been invited to spend Christmas at Colin's family home. Colin, the cowboy bassist of his former band.

One week later, on New Year's Eve, while stumbling home from a party, Vincent

attempted to hurdle a sandwich board left out on the sidewalk when his foot caught the top and he more or less fell forward directly onto his face. Myself, Matthew, and Colin helped him back to the apartment, whereupon we continued our New Year's festivities. There was an angry cement scrape around Vincent's nose and upper lip, and he'd chipped one of his lower teeth. It was unquestionably a face worthy of the deepest empathy. His upper lip was ballooning with each passing minute, which had an effect on the way he was enunciating the few words that he spoke – words that were the unvarying refrain of “I thought I could clear it.” Self-pity and regret had obviously yet to really settle in. His expression was more one of amazement in the face of that answerless question of why, in a deeper sense, this had to have happened to him.

As we continued to drink, and as the music played from Matthew's record player, we kept telling Vincent, who was slouched on his stool with an unopened bottle of beer before him, to stop touching the iridescent red scrape between his nose and his inflating upper lip. I happened to be watching him one moment as he was staring into space and dabbing his grubby finger against the red of his wound when I spontaneously proposed to the company that, if everyone was able, we should all take a trip the next day to spend a night or two at my grandfather's cottage, about one hour north of the city, where we could all have a good time and, more importantly, where Vincent could hide his face from the world. I was off school for the holidays while the three of them weren't due back at their jobs until the 2nd, so it was agreed: first thing in the morning I would get my grandfather's spare car, always available to me, the key to the cottage, likewise, and we would head up north for one day and one night. But when I returned the next morning with the car, an embarrassingly luxurious black Lexus, Colin and Matthew were both

shaking their heads as they walked from the front porch around to the trunk with their bags. Vincent was sequestered inside his bedroom, Matthew said, and refusing to come. I went upstairs to try and persuade him otherwise, but it was of no use – he was intent on brooding and healing by himself.

The pleasure afforded me by a sleep undisturbed by the rummaging family of squirrels was not to be taken for granted, and it was this that I thought of as I backed out of the driveway. Vincent's refusal to join us had only dampened our spirits initially, and so the car ride quickly turned into an affair of loud music and dope-smoking. We drove north along the highway lined on each side with a straight layer of greyish snow, passing multiplexes and the unattractive fronts of maroon-coloured warehouses and an area of marshland that, so Matthew noted, was the most fertile plot of land in the province. We turned off the highway and found our way onto a country road, the tires grumbling along the gravel underneath, while all around us spread the sizeable plots of farmland, the snow much whiter and much more abundant than in the city, and above the few clouds caught their silver edges against the bright sun, while the frail black limbs of the trees with their hoary tips shivered with the wind. The road eventually circled around two distant silos, circled round that lonely pair and lead us down to the water, to the private road where my cottage stood.

It's a white bungalow that I've been visiting since I was a kid. Colin and Matthew were impressed by its humble exterior and the not-so humble field preceding it, which is the entire length of its very long driveway, with two huge oaks in the centre standing side by side. We unloaded the car, put the groceries into the fridge, put Matthew's steaks onto the counter to defrost, and moved our bags into the separate bedrooms. When I walked

through the living room on my way to turn the heat on, Colin was standing before the bass mounted above the fireplace, gently tapping his forefinger against its upper teeth. Matthew was standing nearby, staring out the back windows at the frozen lake, rubbing his hands together for a bit of warmth. It was the early afternoon. Outside the cottage it was a veritable tundra, and the wind was clearly picking up. Still, with the support of alcohol, we managed to muster the courage to go for a short walk. I took them to a path leading deep into the woods from the private road, though we didn't last very long.

From dinner onwards the night degenerated as we became progressively more drunk and progressively more stoned. We eventually lost Matthew – he passed out fully-clothed on top of the covers of his bed. Strewn by the fireplace and its glowing embers were the remnants of two unfinished games of monopoly and gin-rummy, to say nothing of a continent-shaped wine stain made by Colin hours before. Colin was about to pass out himself in front of the television while watching one of my grandfather's VHS tapes of a Dean Martin Celebrity Roast before I shut it off and suggested we go outside again for some fresh air, maybe even step out onto the frozen lake. This last idea won him over. I guess it was either that, sleep, or another spirited invective by Don Rickles.

Across the bay, under the black sky, a line of lights flashed red and yellow. I remember the wind pushing against the hood of my puffy coat. Colin had walked out further than I was comfortable with, and I urged him not to be so self-assured about the solidity of the lake's frozen surface. He was dressed in a thin 70's style jacket, inadequate for winter, with no hat over his big bushy head of curly blonde hair, and no gloves either. There was the contrast of the black sky against the white of the lake. It felt as though we

were standing in the shadow of some enormous and unseen creature, and the intermittent gusts of wind, blowing and whistling past our ears, certainly did nothing to make this impression of mine less ominous. The flatness of the lake was interrupted everywhere by mounds of snow and ice, which Colin carefully maneuvered around as he walked towards me. It occurred to me then, as his spindly legs stepped cautiously forward, how little I knew of him.

“Look,” he said.

I turned around and saw Matthew standing by the windows in the light of the living room, looking out at us. He had what I’ve heard a comedian term “Irish hair”: a wavy heap of brown swept over to one side. We waved and he did the same before disappearing into another room.

“So Matt tells me you and Vincent are thick as thieves.”

“We’re friends, if that’s what you mean.”

“Well I think it’s pretty admirable, if you ask me.”

Of course, nobody did ask him. Regardless, there was something surprisingly but vaguely forward in that choice of word, *admirable*, and something I read in his voice as well, which made me decide to respond the way I did. “I suppose you’re right,” I said. “I suppose it is admirable in one sense.”

The response did what I thought it would do: it gave the lie that he was already on solid ground. “So, did you know all about it before, or did Vincent tell you?”

This question demanded a special kind of non-response. “Well, both, sort of.”

“Wow, I’m impressed,” he said. “I’m definitely impressed. I don’t think I’d be able to do the same, you know, just forget about it or whatever?”

By this point my mind was actively contemplating a billion variations of the same question, which isn't the choice state of mind to be in when trying to keep up in a conversation of this nature. So I was thankful when he finally broke the silence.

"Do you still keep in touch with her?"

"We are, just to make sure, talking about my ex-girlfriend?"

"Yeah." He was thrown-off, though only momentarily. "What's her name again?"

"Lara."

"Lara, that's it. I met her a couple times. Pretty girl." He bent over and picked up a clump of snow. "So . . . do you or don't you?"

"What?"

"Keep in touch."

"Not really, no."

"And what about Vincent? Does he still keep in touch with her?"

Now he was starting to get under my skin. "You know," I said, with a tone of finality, "I'm not really sure about that. But I wouldn't think so."

Where was the moon? It was behind us, somewhere, unconcerned with where we stood, surrounded by such an expansive kind of stillness, the frozen lake cloaked in shadow, the black sky with its black clouds, the stars, and the few lights, red and yellow, flashing in a straight line across the bay. "What's he *doing*?" Colin laughed. I turned around to see Matthew standing again before the windows in the living room. Stupid hair. I suddenly felt a seething hatred rising up inside of me for the two people I'd brought to my grandfather's cottage. They smoked indoors against my wishes, spilt wine on the carpet. Soon they would wrap fresh linens around their unclean bodies. Colin, who I

barely knew, with that obnoxious hair, and that ridiculous jacket, still holding, for no discernable reason, that clump of snow, leading me inside to be the first to enter my own cottage. The length of time before I would be free of them felt interminable. And I would've preferred any day of the week the rummaging of that family of squirrels inside the walls back home over the activity of my mind that night, which flashed and flashed with a speed and a repetitiveness so primitive in nature, while I tossed and turned in a moving and sleepless heap, in the child-sized bed of my old summer bedroom.

3

I could tell as soon as we got back from the cottage that a change had come over Vincent. For one thing, he was still sequestered behind his bedroom door. When I was finally admitted entrance, I found him standing with his back to me, examining his face within an inch of the mirror. The scrape around his nose and upper lip was not healing well at all. There was a hideous area of pus surrounding it. Innocently, he asked me after I walked into his room whether I thought it would at some point leave without leaving a trace of itself behind. He was worried that he'd have a permanently discoloured spot on his upper lip. I assured him, in an unqualified way, that it would heal properly, but this did little to temper the more psychological effects of the scrape. It seemed to me that during our night at the cottage the drunken fall on New Year's Eve had burrowed its way into his conscience. Vincent was someone who took being hard on yourself to the extreme. So it wasn't a shock to discover that, in this short time, he'd conferred on the scrape a symbolic value. It was symbolic for all that was presently wrong with his life. He told me as much himself, while standing before another mirror a few days later, this time the bathroom's.

It wasn't completely unreasonable that such an injury could provoke this kind of a psychological reckoning. In the terrible twenties, as I like to call them, it's not uncommon that even the slightest change or upsetting circumstance can lead one to the hasty conclusion of *my life's a fucking mess*. This is my experience, anyway. In Vincent's case, it wasn't unreasonable because the wound was really unsightly, the kind of mysterious wound with unknown causes that you'd expect to see on a homeless man's face. So his self-imposed isolation policy was only partly histrionic. What else could he

have done? Gone out to a bar with a gleaming red scrape covered in pus? It wasn't exactly concealable, unless he could grow a lightning quick moustache, which he couldn't. A black eye would've been far more presentable. In the end, I think his hiding out lasted more than a whole month since the first time I remember going outside of the home with him since that New Year's night was on Valentine's Day, February 14th. That marked the first time he deemed the face presentable to those other than his coworkers, his roommates, and those people who happened to catch him in their sights while he hurried to and from work.

I convinced him to accompany me to some single's thing, a kitschy sort of event where everyone had a number stuck to their shirt and a corresponding mailbox, which was one of many numbered envelopes hanging against one large wall of the bar. Throughout the night, people were periodically consulting their mailbox for a possible Valentine, or they would go over and insert a Valentine into someone else's mailbox. I remember receiving one note from a number 36 and after searching the bar as indiscreetly as possible I was disappointed to discover that the number 36 was clumsily affixed to the Hawaiian shirt of a balding male of indeterminate age. Vincent, meanwhile, was having more luck. He spent the whole time in conversation with an attractive blonde girl. I even caught them making out in the corner at a point in the night when the crowd had become sloppy with drunkenness. I walked back alone that night, while Vincent didn't return until the next morning.

I think they saw each other for two months or possibly longer, Vincent and the blonde girl. It didn't much matter to me, I was busy with school. But hearing the sounds of sex behind his bedroom door did serve as an unpleasant reminder that the sufferers of

I.A.D in 33 Barton Street had been reduced to one. Not to mention I hadn't forgotten about my conversation with Colin out on the frozen lake. Whereas I couldn't really let that conversation get the best of me in the period of time from early January to mid February, when all of Vincent's energy was being sucked up by that wound, those words Colin spoke that night promptly began to impress their real power over my mind as soon as his wound healed and as soon as Vincent began to enjoy the warm presence of a female body in his bed. The sound of sex, the sound of squirrels – all I had were sounds. Suddenly, the desire for answers overcame me.

To the point that I actually called Lara, something I hadn't done in a very long time. I called and convinced her to have a drink with me. This drink happened sometime in March, on a Sunday. I remember how she didn't want to set a definite time since she wasn't sure when she'd be getting back to the city from Newmarket, where her father was living. As promised, she called when she returned to the city. It wasn't too late. We met for a drink at a bar between my apartment and hers, the same bar, in fact, where she once told me all about her sexual escapades while overseas with her friend Denise.

I will not expend time and energy recapturing that night. I choose not to describe the weather, the bar, how she looked in the light, etc., all of which I'm all too capable of doing. It's simply not worth it this time. It's enough to say, I think, that I haven't seen her since. I haven't seen Lara in three years. All I know is she married sometime last year and has since relocated to Vancouver. But she was single when we met for drinks that night, or at least that's what I remember her saying. I certainly believe, even long after our break-up, that Lara always wished we could establish a friendship. When we were going out, she often asked I make the promise that we would know each other for the rest

of our lives. Honest to God, she would say it while lying next to me on her bed, on her side, her face right up against mine: "Promise me there will not be a time when I won't know you." This was such a strange, sentimental request to me. Our whole lives? How could I make that promise? Yet she would await my response with something near distress. So much of her, it seemed, depended upon whether I would reassure her of this.

Of course I did reassure her. But whether or not we would know each other for our whole lives was never much of a concern to me, not in the same way it was for her. I suppose this is what I'm trying to communicate: while it's true she clearly fell out of love with me, I'm still convinced that, during this time, she was always hoping we could establish a lasting friendship. She wasn't ready to cast me out of her life completely. After all, we were each other's first love, and shouldn't one always try to keep track of a first love? It's like keeping track of a mole that could either turn out malignant or turn out benign so one must not lose sight of it. This is why I think she agreed to meet for a drink that night, albeit wearily.

Wearily, since she knew what to expect, and she feared her expectations. If I behaved the way she feared, then she would be forced to do just that – cast me out of her life completely. If I proved to her that still, after all this time, I hadn't yet overcome my jealousy, then what else could she do? Meanwhile, I saw things differently. This is how I saw it: how can we even begin to *think* about establishing a friendship if there are still hurtful secrets between us? To which she would say: what's done is done. The past is the past. The secrets you're looking for don't matter anymore. If you had a new girlfriend, one you cared for deeply, then you wouldn't care whether or not I was sleeping with Vincent during the whole last year of our relationship. And I would say: yes, if I had a

new girlfriend, Lara. If I wasn't spending all my time with Vincent, my friend and my roommate. Maybe then it wouldn't matter.

When I posed the question, the look she gave me was an irritation that is meant to postpone sadness. She may have thought, on the way back from Newmarket, as she gazed out the window at that area of marshland that is apparently the most fertile plot of land in the province, she may have convinced herself then that I really just genuinely wanted to see her. And who knows, maybe this thought warmed her. We could reminisce about old times. We could resituate ourselves into each other's life. Once again we could cultivate a deep and common bond. Well I played that card for the first ten minutes or so, but only because I thought it rude to jump into my allegations before receiving our drinks. As soon as we did receive our drinks, though, I didn't delay. In fact, I posed the question right when the waiter was out of earshot. Were you or were you not sleeping with Vincent while he lived with you during the whole last year of our relationship? Vincent, not only my roommate, but my very close friend. That was the last time I saw Lara.